

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 10-AUSA TODAY
11 April 1986

STAT

OPINION

The Debate: THE USA'S SECRETS

Today's debate includes our opinion that too many secrets and spies, not leaks or aggressive reporting, are the real threat to our national security, an opposing view from Rhode Island, other views from Illinois, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia, and voices from across the USA.

Too many secrets are real security risk

"The White House," President Reagan says, "is the leakiest place I've ever been in."

The president wasn't talking about the White House roof. In his speech to newspaper editors this week, he deplored a leak most editors love — the disclosure of information. He said it's such a serious problem that planning for U.S. operations off Libya was limited to a "few people."

CIA Director William Casey went further. He said the publication of secrets has destroyed intelligence sources and cost taxpayers "millions and even billions of dollars."

Leaks are nothing new. After all, George Washington leaked the news that the British would surrender at Yorktown to a Philadelphia newspaper.

Today, it's no secret that our government keeps far too many secrets. There are nearly 20 million government records that are classified, and 4 million government employees have clearances to see classified information.

It's ludicrous to think 40 people can keep a secret. How can 4 million? If they were seeing it for the first time, some bureaucrats would classify the Constitution.

Consider some of the "secrets" the media have reported through the years:

■ A report that the space shuttle carried a spy satellite. The Pentagon complained about the leak, but an Air Force official said later little was reported that was not already public information.

■ The Watergate scandal. Without leaks, the public would never have known the extent of White House involvement in the burglary and the subsequent cover-up.

■ The publication of the Pentagon Papers. The government claimed printing the leaked details of how we got into the Vietnam War would endanger U.S. lives. Courts disagreed, and the knowledge we gained may have saved lives later.

Instead of harming us, most disclosures help us better understand what government is up to. We are entitled to know what our federal government is doing, just as we deserve to know how much the school board will pay teachers or whether the city council will raise taxes.

There are those who cry that journalists are unpatriotic. They claim reporters would sacrifice national security for a hot story. That's nonsense. Journalists frequently withhold sensitive information if it would be dangerous or irresponsible to reveal it. Even CIA Director Casey admits that.

The real disclosures that have damaged our national security have not come from the media. No, those disclosures came from quislings and traitors — the Johnny Walkers and the other spies — who sold secrets to the Soviets.

Sure, sometimes leaks embarrass public servants. And they've caused a bureaucratic flap or two. Because we live in freedom, not under the thumb of a totalitarian state, our democracy is messy. And to a great degree, our freedom depends on how much we know about our government.

Yes, the White House leaks. But it would be a mistake to fix it.